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Trying to Soothe SALT's Critics

The Administration claims the Soviets are playing fair

We have had five years of monitoring Soviet compliance with the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, and the record to date has been generally good."

So insisted a U.S. arms-control expert last week as the Carter Administration stepped up its efforts to soften opposition in Congress to a new SALT treaty. The old pact expired in October, but the U.S. and Soviet Union have agreed to continue abiding by it while negotiators in Geneva bargain on a SALT II treaty.

If they reach an accord, it will have to be ratified by the Senate before taking effect. But fears persist on Capitol Hill that the Soviets have underhandedly violated the old SALT agreement and cannot be trusted to keep a new one. Indeed, former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird accused Moscow of exactly that in a recent article in the *Reader's Digest* titled, *Arms Control: The Russians Are Cheating!*

In an 18-page report given to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance admits that the Soviets have taken full advantage of loopholes in the old treaty and operated at its uppermost limits. Nonetheless, the report concludes that Moscow has not committed any clear-cut violations of SALT I.

The report is based largely on the supersecret proceedings of the Standing Consultative Commission in Geneva, which is a joint U.S.-Soviet grievance board for monitoring SALT I, and the National Security Council's Verification Panel. By making the information public, the Administration sought to refute Laird's charges, as well as those made by other SALT opponents. The chief points:

► In 1973, the U.S. suspected (presumably on evidence from spy satellites) that the Soviets were violating the treaty by building new missile silos. When challenged, the Russians explained that the installations were actually new bunkers for missile technicians and thus not prohibited. According to the report, further inves-

tigation by U.S. intelligence sources determined that the Soviets were telling the truth.

► In 1973 and 1974, the U.S. spotted the Soviets using an antiaircraft radar system to track one of their own missiles in flight. The U.S. questioned whether the Soviets were illegally converting antiaircraft defenses into an antiballistic missile system. But the Soviets maintained that they were using the radar only to test the rocket's navigation system. Still, notes the report, the radar activity ceased "a short time later."

► In 1974, the U.S. thought that the Soviets might be breaking the treaty by taking steps, not spelled out in the report, that could enable them eventually to conceal installations from U.S. spy satellites. When the U.S. complained, the Soviets stopped the activities.

► In 1975, the Soviets began deploying monster SS-18 super-rockets, which can carry as many as eight independently targetable warheads, despite a treaty provision that forbids the converting of land-based "light" ICBM launchers into vehicles for "heavy" ones. But since SALT I does not define "light" and "heavy," the Administration decided that there was no violation. The report promises that this loophole will be closed in SALT II.

The report also discloses that the Soviets questioned whether the U.S. was violating SALT I on five occasions, though all of the queries were later withdrawn. In one case, the Russians objected to temporary shelters used to protect U.S. Minuteman missile silos from rain and snow while they were being rebuilt, beginning in 1973. After the U.S. reduced the size of the shelters by half, the Soviets dropped the matter.

Senate supporters of SALT predictably praised the report. Said Democrat John Culver of Iowa: "It should lay to rest attempts to undermine arms-limitation efforts." Added Democrat Gary Hart of Colorado: "The U.S. has been vigilant." But opponents, who are led by Washington Senator Scoop Jackson, were far from satisfied. Said an aide to one prominent Senate skeptic: "The compliance

report is a real whitewash. We intend to go over it line by line."

The debate over SALT was heated up even more last week by new evidence of possible Soviet transgressions, ones the Vance report does not address. According to some Defense Department analysts, Moscow is operating 64 ballistic-missile submarines—two more than the ceiling set by SALT I. Other U.S. analysts argue that because the two extra subs have not yet been sent out on patrol, the Soviets have not exceeded the limit. Moreover, three additional new Soviet Delta-class missile subs have been rigged and are ready for sea trials, but they also have not been used on patrols. Thus, says a U.S. Navy intelligence officer, "right now it is official judgment that no hard evidence of Soviet violations exists, though we do agree that they are pushing right out to the edges."

At the same time, as the Administration was trying to soothe U.S. critics of SALT, President Carter was warning the Soviets that their military intervention in Ethiopia was straining relations with the U.S. and jeopardizing SALT II's chances. He carefully noted that the Administration was not linking the war in the Horn of Africa with the arms-limitation talks. But, he added, Soviet actions could "lessen the confidence of the American people in the ... peaceful intentions of the Soviet Union." Carter's point: alarm in the Senate over Soviet intervention in the war between Ethiopia and Somalia might cause any SALT treaty to be rejected. In short, only the Russians can keep SALT II from getting caught between the Horn and the Hill. ■